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SUBJECT: MOROCCO: THE KING RESHUFFLES THE CABINET

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: King Mohammed VI appointed on January 4 five government ministers, a mere 24 hours after he had addressed the nation to announce the creation of an Advisory Committee for Regionalization tasked with accelerating the GOM's plan to devolve power to the regions. The new ministers are: Minister of Interior Taieb Cherkaoui, Minister of Justice Mohamed Naciri, Minister of Tourism Yassir Zenagui, Minister in Charge of Relations with the Parliament Driss Lachgar, and Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister in Charge of Modernizing Public Sectors Mohamed Saad Alami. The changes at Interior and Justice are significant and will potentially impact major Moroccan initiatives including regionalization, judicial reform and Western Sahara policy. The other changes are less significant for U.S. policy but fraught with political intrigue. Furthermore, the way in which the King imposed the changes on a weak government does not necessarily represent a step forward in the democratization process. END SUMMARY.

Two Shake-Ups in Two Days

12. (SBU) King Mohammed addressed the nation on January 3 to announce the creation of the Advisory Committee for Regionalization, calling for more government power to be devolved to the regions. This GOM initiative, which the King originally proposed more than two years ago, is deeply linked to the Moroccan autonomy plan for resolving the Western Sahara conflict. The regionalization initiative, and the King's naming now of a 22-member committee to jump start the process, represent a clear acknowledgement by the GOM that its autonomy plan can only be considered a workable solution if political power, which is currently highly centralized in Rabat, is devolved (Septel). Rumors had abounded for months that a GOM cabinet shuffle was imminent, and many observers were surprised that the King did not also announce ministerial changes in his January 3 speech. However, palace sources say that on January 3, after the King's speech, Royal Advisor Mohamed Moatassim privately informed the political leaders of the upcoming government reshuffle. And on January 4, those changes became public.

Big Change at the MOJ

13. (SBU) Moatassim first notified Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) Secretary General and Minister of Justice Abdelwahed Radi that the King had consented to his year-old request to leave the Justice Ministry to devote his efforts to reforming the USFP. Radi was never an ideal fit at MOJ. The King had given him the daunting task of implementing a sweeping judicial reform, but Radi had no legal background. Radi's ministry recently submitted 17 reform initiatives to Parliament, but the larger task of devising a plan for judicial reform will fall to his successor. In addition, political parties have controlled the Justice Ministry since 1993 -- an arrangement with which the Palace has never been fully comfortable. Some view Radi's departure as a step toward returning the MOJ to its status as a "sovereign ministry," i.e., a ministry like Defense, Foreign Affairs, Interior and Islamic Affairs that is not assigned to the parties in government but, rather, reports directly to the King.

14. (SBU) As Radi's replacement, the King appointed Mohamed Naciri, currently a partner at Morocco's most prestigious law firm. Naciri has no party affiliation, and his nomination may well be a further signal that the Justice Minister is returning -- officially or unofficially -- to being a sovereign ministry. Naciri has formidable ties to the palace. A former Chairman of the Casablanca Bar Council and member of the Constitutional Court from 1993-1999, Naciri has served repeatedly as counsel for the monarchy, for several ministries and -- perhaps most importantly -- for Sigar, the holding company that manages the lion's share of the royal family's extensive investments. More than simply a technocrat, Naciri is renowned for his regionalization expertise and is deeply trusted by the King and his inner circle.

The New Top Cop

15. (SBU) The other major shake-up, in addition to the MOJ, comes at the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), where the King tapped eminent jurist Taieb Cherkaoui to succeed technocrat Chakib Benmoussa as Minister. Media pundits and anti-Sahrawi independence activists were quick to characterize Benmoussa's removal as a sanction in the wake of his mishandling of the Aminatou Haidar case. Political parties, on the other hand, cited his ministry's frequent legal and procedural spats with the powerful pro-Palace Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) following the 2009 communal elections as a possible reason for his removal. However, Benmoussa's supporters say he will land on his feet, and rumors already abound that he is poised to become either a special advisor to the King or, perhaps ironically, CEO of Siger.

16. (SBU) Cherkaoui's replacement spent his career in the Ministry of Justice until he was nominated in 2008 to be President of the Supreme Court. Like Naciri, he has strong ties to the Palace, holding at one time the influential position of Director of Royal Pardons. With his professional background, Cherkaoui is expected to reinforce a serious partnership between the MOI and the MOJ for the King's regionalization plan, with the MOI maintaining principal oversight of the process. Interestingly, in handing Morocco's most powerful ministry to Cherkaoui -- the MOI not only controls Morocco's law enforcement and security apparatus, but also controls the budget of every Moroccan region and city -- King Mohammed VI also retained the MOI's very powerful Secretary of State (Deputy

Minister), Saad Hassar.

Co-opting the Opposition

¶7. (SBU) While the King replaced ministers at two heavyweight ministries -- Justice and Interior -- with palace-friendly technocrats, his other changes were more political. After removing Radi from the MOJ, the King awarded his party, the USFP, with the Ministry in Charge of Relations with Parliament (MRP), previously held by rightist Istiqlal Party Minister Saad Alami, who became Minister-Delegate Charged with Modernizing the Public Sector.

¶8. (SBU) However, it was not the consolation prize that stunned observers, but rather the choice of USFP MP Driss Lachgar as Minister in Charge of Relations with Parliament. Lachgar, a political opportunist who had long been angling for a ministerial post, had become a major nuisance -- some would say threat -- to his party, the Government and the Palace, thanks to his incessant calls for the USFP to abandon the governing coalition and form an alliance in opposition with the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD). The Palace has made no secret in recent months of its effort to isolate the PJD -- an effort spearheaded by the pro-Palace PAM (reftels). By naming Lachgar as the very minister charged with arguing the government's positions to the opposition, the King and the USFP clearly colluded to neutralize the growing interest within Lachgar's wing of the USFP in a coalition with the PJD, and to further isolate the PJD.

Kicking the RNI When It's Down

¶9. (SBU) Although the final changes came at two minor ministries -- Tourism and Public Sector Modernization (PSM) -- they were also fraught with political consequences. In both cases, senior party officials from the National Rally of Independents (RNI) lost cabinet seats, a further blow to a party that appears to be self-destructing. For months, a bitter feud within the RNI has dominated Moroccan political headlines, pitting the old guard, represented by party Secretary General and President of the Chamber of Deputies (parliament's lower house) Mustapha Mansouri against a reformist wing led by RNI Minister of Economy and Finance Salahedine Mezouar. The Moroccan monarchy has a long-stated policy of avoiding involvement in political parties' internal problems, but few observers doubt that the RNI's internal problems cost them two ministers in this reshuffle, leaving them with only four cabinet posts. At Tourism, the King sacked Mohamed Bousaid, one of Mezouar's reformists, and replaced him with Yassir Znagui, an RNI member but utter political unknown. And at PSM, the RNI lost its post altogether, with Istliqlali Saad Alami replacing Mohamed Abbou of the RNI's old guard.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The changes at Interior and Justice are significant, and they could have an impact on major Moroccan initiatives that are of interest to the USG. For example, if the GOM is truly serious about judicial reform, Naciri will prove, as Justice Minister, well-positioned and clearly capable of making it happen. Likewise, the MOI under Cherkaoui

should be poised implement a meaningful regionalization -- without which, Morocco's autonomy plan for the Western Sahara is simply hollow. On the other hand, if the Palace really does not intend to implement these programs, the ministers are equally well placed to keep anything from happening. More widely, the other changes are less significant for U.S. policy but fraught with political intrigue. And the way in which the King imposed the changes on a weak government do not necessarily represent a step forward in the democratization process. End Comment.

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